

Community-Building in a Diverse Setting

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Abstract Research demonstrates that community-building in schools is an integral aspect of student success. Based on a foundation of research findings related to the importance of implementing community-building into all aspects of a school, community-building activities, including five specific classroom strategies (parent visits to tell about child, weekly newsletter with interactive activities, bi-monthly open-house hour where children explain school work to parents, Valentine letters filled with true compliments, and a cultural celebration unit focused on Africa), were implemented in an urban magnet school. This school was moving toward racial integration as well as implementation of a Montessori education program. As predicted from research information, incorporating community-building strategies geared at creating a welcoming climate, at improving faculty interaction, at fostering collaborative classrooms, and towards on-going and open teacher/parent communication and collaboration resulted in positive outcomes in what could have otherwise been a difficult, negative or unproductive situation.

Keywords Community-building · Diversity · Parent involvement · Magnet school · Faculty team building · Montessori

Building a sense of community is a challenge to teachers in our increasingly diverse schools. Classrooms are not only becoming more culturally and racially varied, but in the absence of teacher intervention, students show a marked preference for same ethnicity peers (Bellmore et al. 2007). When I (Audrey Rule) taught a combination first-second grade class at a newly established magnet school in the Deep South, I experienced the challenge of helping my African American students whose families had always attended this urban, low socioeconomic neighborhood school and the children of white families who opted to send them here for our special Montessori program to accept each other. There was initial resistance from parents and teachers alike. Our parent–teacher association organized several evening programs to explain components of the new Montessori system, to introduce families to each other, and to foster favorable reception of the new curriculum. Involvement of parents in the school is a key factor in alleviating racial divides (McKay et al. 2003) along with improving school performance of children of low socioeconomic families (Jacobs and Harvey 2005; Vieno et al. 2005). Home/school collaboration has been shown to strengthen the cultural competency of teachers with a positive impact on the early learning of young children (Bagdi and Vacca 2005).

Our school opened the doors to racial integration when we were just at the beginning of learning to implement an educational system new to us, the Montessori program. In this editorial, we (Audrey Rule, a former classroom teacher now an elementary education professor and Patricia Kyle, also formerly a classroom teacher and now a counseling professor) share ways community-building factors worked together to create a cohesive school community, turning a potentially negative situation into a positive one. These tactics included parent involvement, strategies to change

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school climate, faculty bonding activities, and five specific ways that I supported community-building in my magnet school classroom.

Parent Involvement

Several strategies were implemented to increase a sense of community through parent involvement. Our school counselor initiated the process by making home visits to all families to meet family members, to understand living situations, to learn about employment, and to orient them to our new program. In addition to giving information to parents, the home visits began establishing solid home/school connections so important to the academic success of young children (Allen and Tracy 2004; Meyer and Mann 2006).

Our first parent-involved school theme in our new program was “looking ahead to and preparing for different jobs.” The counselor helped with finding ways to include parents in this activity supported by research showing that envisioning oneself in different jobs was an effective way to both prepare for and bring about that job in the future (Boyle 2002). Teacher/parent relationships, a key element in young children’s success in school (Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2008), were also strengthened when parents volunteered to give brief presentations on their jobs as they fit in with classroom topics and as parents helped in the school office or classrooms. Research (Harvey 2007; Huguélet 2007) shows that parents working collaboratively with school personnel help low income students to overcome learning barriers.

Community-Building

Our principal, who won the title of best principal in the state our first year as a magnet school for her pioneering efforts, furthered our community-building each morning. She addressed the children as they gathered in the cafeteria just after arrival or finishing of their school breakfasts. She spoke to us all, students, teachers and often parents too, for just a few minutes before we were dismissed to our classrooms, telling us about recent school happenings, congratulating students, or discussing important issues. Such communication is an effective tool to engender a sense of community and to foster respect (Reese 2007). In fact, “respect,” one of her favorite words, was often the message of her short talks.

I had just joined the faculty of an elementary school housed in a 54-year-old building. I walked into my classroom with crumbling plaster walls, annoyingly bright red, yellow and blue lockers lining two walls and bullet-hole-

marked windows. It was one week before classes started and I had several gallons of paint with me to refresh the room. The finished room had white walls with a set of pink, green, aqua, and royal blue horizontal stripes above the chalkboards. The lockers were now a uniform royal blue, and each of the tables with its chairs was the color of one of the wall stripes. I added stenciled blue frogs in a line above the stripes on one wall. It all looked nice with the dark blue carpet. Lock et al. (2003) identified how important it is to remove physical barriers to children’s learning; a welcoming physical environment is especially critical when schools are increasingly diverse (Ford 2005).

Luckily, my painting project provided the opportunity for me to meet another teacher who became one of my best friends at the school. She was one of the kindergarten teachers, an African-American woman from the community. She entered my room and looked around. “You new here?” she asked. I nodded. “It looks nice,” she observed. “You ever teach at an all-black school before?” she wondered. I told her I did four years ago during student teaching. She studied my white face. “Oh, baby,” she said sympathetically, “I’ll help you.” I told her I would appreciate that and she asked me to put some of those stenciled frogs in her room. This initial small step supported the ideas of creating both a welcoming environment throughout the school and of strengthening faculty relationships to enhance our integration and program implementation goals.

But it wasn’t all that easy at our school. Members of our multi-race and ethnic faculty had to learn to respect each other at the same time that children and their parents were navigating this new path of racial integration. A few days later, after I had participated in a discussion of fund-raising options at our first faculty meeting, three more-experienced teachers stopped me. “Audrey,” one of them said in a stern tone, “We just want to let you know that untenured faculty, like yourself, don’t speak at faculty meetings.” I thought they must be joking and laughed it off. “No,” they replied, “We’re not joking. And furthermore, untenured faculty members don’t speak unless spoken to.” Then they marched off, dismissing me. Yes, faculty team building activities were sorely needed.

Faculty Bonding

Another essential agent in our community-building was the Montessori professional development staff who provided over 400 h of inservice classes to us after school, on weekends and during the summer of our first two years as a magnet school. These instructors helped faculty members to appreciate each other. As we learned the Montessori mathematics system with concrete representations of

concepts such as squares of numbers and hands-on materials for seeing how basic operations work, most teachers admitted how they previously hadn't deeply understood many of these mathematical ideas themselves. We worked together to practice using the wonderful, but often complex materials. This cooperation to learn a system new to all of us helped us appreciate each other's contributions to understanding, successfully making us a team. Such teacher collaboration not only fosters respect among the teachers, but produces a higher level of teacher caring, which has been demonstrated to result in higher academic achievement for students (Strahan and Layell 2006).

The Montessori ideals of peace education and conflict resolution that we learned about also helped. We made great strides in recognizing ways that we, as a faculty, hampered racial integration and acceptance of others as persons. We noticed that we and our schoolchildren often identified others by race in our conversations. We made a special effort to address this in our classes, asking children to think of ways other than race that we can use to talk about another person. Soon, children were saying things like, "that boy in the yellow hat," or that girl on the jungle gym" rather than "that white boy" or "that black girl." Teachers have a powerful influence on the achievement of students that are culturally diverse and/or low income and collaborative teacher involvement with one another has been found to have a crucial impact on that effect being a positive one Tucker et al. (2005). When teachers fail to work together to create culturally responsive classrooms, the pressures upon teachers to respond to this need traces to the high attrition of teachers in urban schools McKinney et al. (2005).

Five Classroom Strategies

To accomplish the goal of bringing community-building into the classroom and creating an integrated learning environment where all students feel acceptance and belonging, I incorporated five strategies in my classroom. First I implemented a Star-of-the-week program with a new twist. I randomly assigned a week of leadership to each child. On one of those days, the parents or grandparents of that student were invited to visit our class and talk for a few minutes about the Star, showing baby pictures, artwork, and other mementos. Families also told about their current or former jobs, as part of the jobs theme. Then I sat at the classroom computer, and in front of the Star's family, asked each child in my class to tell something good he or she knew about the Star. Perhaps it was something a parent had told us, or something the child already knew from classroom interactions. I typed in the name of the child and his or her statement. These statements ranged from

comments like, "He's good at putting puzzles together," or "She picks up trash from the floor," to "He has a nice haircut," or "I like her red sweater."

This became part of our weekly newspaper. It had several benefits. First, it showed the visiting parents that the children in my class valued their son or daughter. Positive attention focused on strengths is very empowering for students, particularly in a diverse classroom (Watkins 2005). Second, it provided age-appropriate reading material of high interest to the children when the newsletter was sent home (Grabe and Stoller 1997); many children read and re-read these weekly comments until they had them memorized. Third, it provided a lot of goodwill between families. Many parents mentioned to me that they hadn't realized that their child was liked by others until they read the newsletter. In fact, in early October of the first year, when I first conferenced with parents, almost all families expressed discomfort with the racially-integrated classroom situation, fearing that racial fighting would occur. After the Star-of-the-week program, which began a week later, this concern was never again mentioned. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) reported that parental involvement was necessary to create climates that were conducive to learning and respected diversity.

The newsletters home in a "Newsbook" binder were part of a second way I connected school and families. Newsletters as tools for on-going communication with parents have been shown to be one of the most effective tools for establishing parent/teacher relationships (Reese 2007). I sent home a weekly newsletter and interactive project in this binder. Besides a column explaining the good things children in my class knew about the Star of the week, my weekly newsletter had an article summarizing the positive things the child's family had mentioned during their visit, along with an interview with the Star, telling his or her favorite color, foods, and activities. I also highlighted one of our Montessori activities, explaining how it worked, and included an identified comment from each child of what he or she enjoyed or learned from the activity. Other newsletter articles explained special or upcoming events such as a field trip downtown to see a children's theatre production or red ribbon day during which children rally to say "No," to drugs.

Each week there was a worksheet included for family members to tell something about themselves. One week I asked parents to tell how their child received his or her name. I retyped these responses as an additional page to the newsletter so that all families could read the interesting stories. One child was named Moriah, because her pregnant mother found a child's coin purse in a store with that name inked on it; she liked the name so much she gave it to her daughter. Another fall week, I asked parents to tell a favorite fall tradition at their home. Many families told of

raking leaves into a pile and jumping into them, drinking hot chocolate, watching football games, or carving pumpkins. These stories helped the families of children in my class get to know each other at a distance and learn that they had many similarities. Although retyping the stories each week was a lot of work for me, it was worth the extra effort. Children read them at home and reported at school their amazement about some fact concerning a classmate's family. This allowed more positive interaction between my students with the benefit of extra highly-motivated reading practice at home.

The third program I conducted in my classroom to help parents become acquainted with our new Montessori program and with our racially-integrated classroom was open-house. On several afternoons spaced a couple of months apart, we invited parents to visit us during a 1 h work period that was part of our regular school day. Each child was assigned to work with a partner on several different sets of Montessori materials at this time and to explain to any visiting parents how the materials worked. This empowered the children and assured the parents that the children were learning valuable concepts, even though many of the materials were unfamiliar. Parents also observed how well children interacted with each other. Many parents engaged in friendly, relaxed conversations with other parents during and after the open-houses. This focus on collaboration has been found to not only empower the students, but also to foster acceptance of diversity (Obenchain and Abernathy 2003).

Another way I helped build community in my classroom was through Valentine letters. In January, I introduced the friendly letter format to children. Each day for four weeks I assigned a classmate to each child to whom he or she would write three compliments in the body of the letter. We brainstormed possible nice things that one might write, such as "You are a fast runner in P.E.," "I saw you help other people with their writing," or "You have pretty eyes." I wrote these on index cards for our resource file at the writing center. I emphasized that each letter must tell *true* facts about the recipient. Positive and specific affirmations are essential for creating respect in the classroom (Reese 2007). Every day I conferenced individually with students as they completed their letters, helping them correct errors or clarify what was being written. I collected the letters for later. As an art project, we made fancy covers for our valentine books with glittered tissue paper hearts. I also took photographs of the children to include in our valentine books as autograph pages. I wrote a personal, detailed letter to each child myself telling how each shined in our class in his or her own way. Then, a couple of parent volunteers and I sorted all the letters and assembled them into books, punching holes, adding the covers, and binding them together with curling ribbon. What beautiful treasures

they were! At our valentine party, each child received his or her book. It was so much fun for the children to read their letters full of sincere praise and to ask classmates for autographs. So many parents reported to me how their children had read the letters again and again and what a positive impact it had on them. Focusing on believable praise and encouraging statements is a powerful tool for empowering children (Schrunk 1997). I certainly saw the effects in my classroom: there were no misbehaviors for several weeks after our valentine party.

A final major strategy I used was to unify much of my instruction during the year with the theme of "Discovering Africa," a celebration of African natural history and culture. At the start of the year, I asked families to send in three yards of broadcloth of the color of their choice for an African costume. We integrated mathematics into this thematic unit by measuring ourselves for the caftan gowns we made, by making our own fabric stamps of rubber pieces glued to a cardboard base to create patterns along the edges of the caftans, and by recording and sequencing the steps in completing them. We also made fancy bead collars of wallpaper from sample books with the Montessori bead stair in front flanked by homemade beads of polymer clay or paper (art projects) and with a punched-and laced-edge. As additional parts of the unit, we learned the names of the continents and information about African animals' adaptations for the environment, along with reading and writing about many captivating African folktales. Our music teacher taught us an African broom dance which we performed in our costumes to a standing ovation during a school assembly. Purnell et al. (2007) investigated the positive impact of integrating a celebration of cultures in the early childhood curriculum and discovered that it not only helped with diversity relations, but also developed more appreciation for the learning.

Making Headway

I knew that we had come a long way at our school when our principal spoke to us one morning in late spring about the problem of one of our students. He was the older brother of a girl in my classroom and the only white boy at his grade level, as most of our white children had entered our school in kindergarten or first grade. Before we had become a magnet school, the few white children living near the school had enrolled in other local schools because our school had a history of prejudice and bullying.

The brother of my student had been hit by a truck when he was crossing the street near his home. The wheel of the truck had actually rolled over his head, but by some miracle, he had escaped death and brain damage. He was home from the hospital and ready to come back to school, but his

head was still very fragile. The doctors wanted him to wear his bicycle helmet at school to protect his skull. His mother didn't want anyone to bump him or tease him so that he removed his helmet. The principal told us that she needed a promise from every single child at our school that we would help this boy so he could attend and not fall behind in his learning. There was a silence while the principal spoke and then a pause. Teachers turned to their classes and asked if each child would agree to help out. I looked at each student in my class and saw that each was more than willing. After a few moments the principal asked teachers if they had obtained the promise from each child. Then she asked if there were anyone who would not help in this way. Satisfied, our principal left and returned a few moments later with my student's brother and his mother. Everyone cheered and clapped for him. It was wonderful. Later that day, as we formed a line in the cafeteria, we saw him eating his lunch at a table. All of my students, without any prompting from me, called out and waved to him saying, "Cool helmet," or "Glad you're okay." School-wide efforts to incorporate community-building activities had produced special outcomes. We were now a team capable of working together for betterment of each other.

We found that incorporating community-building strategies that emphasized creating a welcoming school and classroom climate; that fostered helpful faculty connections; that encouraged positive classroom interaction; and that promoted on-going and open teacher/parent communication resulted in a school that worked together to meet the needs of each student. It is energizing to have such positive outcomes when we could have had tension and strife. Community-building activities are one of the most effective tools for creating a school with a climate conducive to learning (Noonan 2004). We recommend that other schools look to our results to fashion their own unique approach to incorporating community-building in their schools with a strong parent component as an essential aspect.

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